A Black Boy's....
PAM.
AFRICA Stories and Incidents
85

Missionary Stories

No. 21.

A BLACK BOY'S THOUGHTS.

A Kafir boy.

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Laymen, 30—in Asia, 23; in Carpentaria, Australia, 3; in Canada, 2; and 2 in Africa. Of these, 11 are non-Europeans—in Asia, 8; in Carpentaria, 2; and in Africa, 1.

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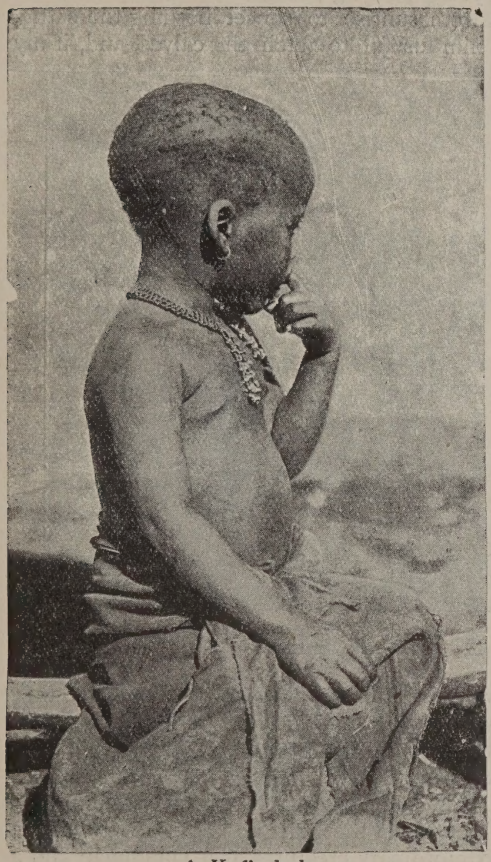
A Black Boy's Thoughts.

SEVENTY years or more ago, in the old fighting days when the tribes of South Africa were continually at war, a forlorn party of fugitives crossed the River Tugela, flying for their lives from Zululand to Natal. The little brown baby boy, the youngest of the family, who rode on his father's back, looked back to that time in after years, and having no dates to go by, spoke of it as "the time of the breaking of the great rope," a time, that is to say, of strife and confusion, scattering of neighbours and breaking up of homes, for it meant trouble for humble folk when chiefs fell out and wanted each other's territory. Kafirs of those days were not exactly people of property, but all that they had these poor fugitives lost, from the cattle,



A Kafir baby.

which made their wealth, down to the picks with which they had hoped to scratch up a few wild roots for food. They settled down at last in beautiful Natal, and the small boy looked back lovingly in after days to the bits of sugar cane, as tall as himself, which he could sit and suck while his mother hoed the garden by the riverside. His education was beginning now, for he was six years' old, big enough to trot after the older boys, who were out from sunrise to sunset herding the cattle. They would make him useful to fetch the calves, and, if my

A Kafir house.

young gentleman were inclined to be lazy or rebellious, they knew very well how to bring him into line, and to teach him that six years has to take orders from ten and twelve. And here, too, he saw a truly wonderful sight, a man with a strange pale skin and light hair, and remarkable clothes, riding on an animal entirely different from the bulls he knew. Later on he named these two extraordinary creatures as a Dutchman and a horse, and he came to know more of this particular Dutchman than he at all desired. For the white man settled in the

neighbourhood and set the people of the place to work on his farm, and punished them if they shirked. And as he and his countrymen possessed a most terrifying weapon, which went off with a flash and a bang when they pulled the trigger, they were clearly not people to be trifled with. So Usetemba (that was the boy's name) and his family flitted again, and settled down in a fresh place. Usetemba was nine years old by this time, and used to spend long days out watching the goats, and, as he himself said, he began to have thoughts. That means that he had begun to ask himself about the reason of things. When we are quite small we take things pretty much as they come, and ask no questions, but sooner or later there comes to all of us a time when we begin, as Usetemba said, to have thoughts, and to wonder about the how and the why of the things we see. Out there on the wide veldt, with the wide sky overhead, there seems to be plenty of room for thinking, and in the long days, while the goats browsed round about, Usetemba wondered about many things.

He wondered who had made it all, the wide stretches of grass, and the rocky hills and the rivers, where the bed was nearly dry in the summer and the water came tearing down in a wild torrent after rain. And he thought about himself and wondered who had made him different from the goats that he watched. Now and then a goat strayed away and he followed it into the wild country where no one lived. And sometimes, away from the kraal, as the Kafirs call their village, and the familiar huts of his own people, he shivered at the remembrance of the wild tales he had heard of wizards who dwelt in lonely places, and who carried people off and changed them into strange, uncanny dwarfish beings, who had to act as their messengers and carry out their malicious plans against other men. True there were other spirits, who, so his father and mother told him, would protect him if they were properly worshipped. Some people said that these were the spirits of the ancestors, the grandfathers and great-grandfathers who had been mighty men in their day, and who came back and lingered round their old dwelling place in the form of snakes. But it was all very vague and shadowy, not much comfort to a scared little boy out of sight of home.

By and by something else happened to set Usetemba thinking. His father fell ill, and though the family killed their

goats one after another to induce the spirits to cure him, he grew worse instead of better. There was no more laughter now in the mud hut. Kafir children love their parents dearly, and Usetemba cried bitterly by himself when he thought that the familiar face might soon be gone from among them. And where would the father go? Would he come back in the form of a snake, as the old people said, to be half dreaded and half honoured by those whom he loved? It was a terrible, mysterious thing, this death, which spared no one and took old or young away into the silence. The little boy would look at the splendid warriors of the tribe and think, "They too will have to die." And his own turn would come too, and where would he go?

The old men had told him all they knew or could guess, and there was no one else to ask.

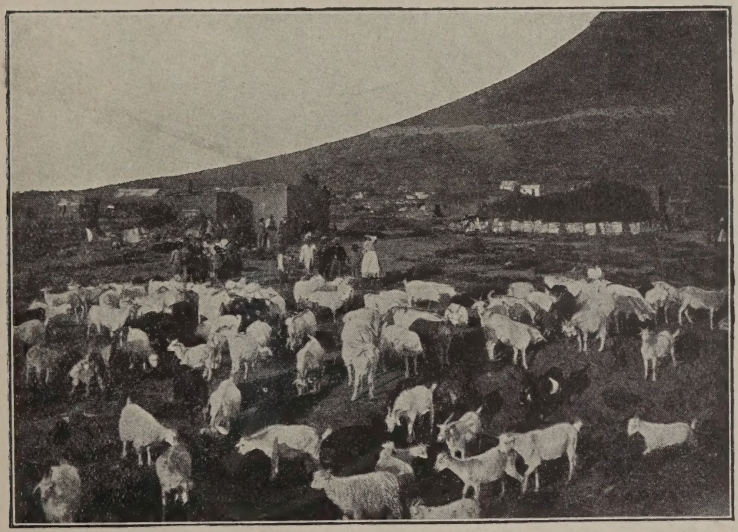
But death did not take Usetemba's father then. He recovered, to the great joy of his family, and partly, as he believed, by the skill of a native doctor who lived some way off, near Pietermaritzburg. African doctors use many strange and terrible remedies, which do their patients much more harm than good, but some among them have discovered the healing powers of certain herbs, and it may have been so in this case. At any rate Usetemba's father decided to go and live nearer to the doctor that he might complete the cure. So he asked leave of the head-man in the village, sold his corn and bought a cow, which could take itself to the new home instead of having to be carried, and off the family went again.

And, as it happened, this was to make more difference to Usetemba than the other shifts had done. For to the largest kraal in the neighbourhood there came once a week a white man, unlike any white men that he had seen before. He was not on the look-out for workmen, he only asked that the people from the kraals round about would gather there once every seven days and hear about One greater than the spirits. The white man wanted them all, men and women, boys and girls.

"Let even the babies come," he said. But the older men murmured at that. There was no saying what those white strangers might do with the young folk. There were tales of boys and girls who had left their homes and the ways of their fathers for good and all, and had given themselves to the foreigners. Besides, the boys had the cattle to mind on one

day of the week as well as another. Let them stay at home and do their own work and leave the white men's talk for their elders.

So Usetemba and his comrades were left behind, and thought it exceedingly hard lines, seeing they had been specially invited and were just as keen as boys of another colour to have a look in at any new thing that might be going on. They sat up on the hill-side with the goats, and watched the people gathering at the big kraal, and thought that the boys



A herd of goats.

who lived there were uncommonly lucky to be on the spot. They were half inclined to run away and slip in somewhere; only there were serious consequences to be considered, for the fathers had assured them that, if any goats were missing when they themselves came back from keeping the white man's holy day, the goat-herds would most certainly have a very bad time for the rest of the evening.

But if the boys could not go to the meeting they could listen with all their ears when the men came back and talked

A native nursery—after dinner.

round their fires of what the white man had said. And Usetemba learnt that the Englishman prayed to the great God Who made the world and all men, and that he said that God was not distant but alive and very near. And the white man had talked, moreover, of a life after death, better and happier than the life that men lived now. Out on the hillside the boys talked it all over together and wondered about it.

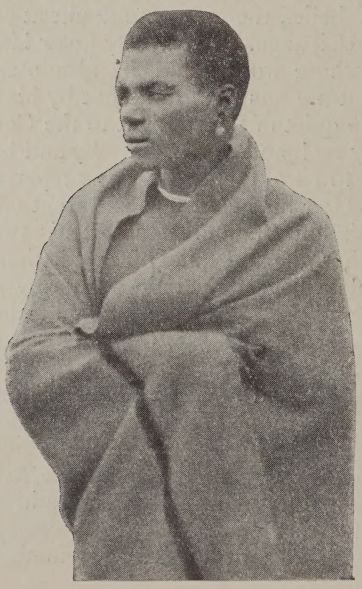
Usetemba, who was sixteen by this time, was growing into manhood, and those strange questionings about the making of the world and the life that lay beyond death puzzled him more and more. He went about his ordinary work, herding the cattle and carrying firewood into Pietermaritzburg to barter with the Dutch people there, and all the time he wondered about the bigger things.

Two special happenings came to make him thoughtful just then.

There was an old man in the kraal named Usibange, who had been learning for a long time from the English missionary. And, however difficult Usetemba might find it to understand the meaning of the Christian belief, there was no doubt at all about what it had done for Usibange. Everybody knew him for an honest man, a man whose word could be absolutely trusted. They knew, too, that he was used to go out by himself at night and to talk in the quiet of the starlight to the God Who was to him a friend very real and very near. By and by they heard that he was going to leave the kraal. He prepared his food for the journey, collected his belongings and went off, driving his cattle, to the Mission Station. One of his two wives refused to go, but the other wife and some of his relations went with him, and the whole village talked the matter over, up and down and backwards and forwards, as people talk who have very little else to do. Some said that Usibange was a fool to leave his own people and to go and cast in his lot with strangers, and some said that he had gone to a happier life. But about one thing there was no doubt at all, that, whether his belief were right or wrong, he believed it with his whole heart and had the pluck to act upon it. And the lad Usetemba admired him, as people all the world over admire a man who has the courage of his convictions.

Just after this Usetemba had a bad illness, his mother

falling sick at the same time. He had plenty of time for thinking as he lay on his mat in the little dark hut while other people herded the goats, and for wondering about the unseen world to which he might so soon be going. But both he and his mother got well again, and he went about his work once more, wishing that he knew whether the God of the white men had cured him or the spirits to whom his people prayed. His family moved again soon after that. Kafirs have so few possessions, and their houses are so quickly built, that moving is not a serious matter, and this time they went by advice of the English Governor, Mr. Shepstone, to land specially given to their tribe. But Usetemba's family fell upon evil days in their new home, for the doctor in whom their father believed so firmly, and who was the head of their kraal, was accused of poisoning the chief. The English Governor's influence saved his life, but his cattle and those of his friends were seized by the chief's family, who had excellent reasons for wanting to find him guilty. That continual dread of witchcraft was always hanging over the Kafir people in the old days. Either someone—perhaps your nearest neighbour—might be practising it on you, or you might be accused of practising it on somebody else, and be put to death or "eaten up," which is the very expressive African fashion of saying "ruined" or "beggared." "Why are we eaten up?" cried the unfortunate people who met their cattle being driven off to somebody else's kraal, and to say that they never dreamed of poisoning or bewitching anybody went for nothing at all in those days. Perhaps these troubles among his own people had something to do with Usetemba's resolution to



A Kafir boy.

go and seek service with a white man. A boy in the kraal, a friend of his, worked for a certain Mr. George, and persuaded Usetemba to come and ask for a place as house-boy. After a little hesitation the Englishman engaged him, thanks partly to the persuasions of his daughters, who were sure that the young Kafir would make a capital cook. So into the Englishman's kitchen he went, and learnt more things than the cooking of the white man's food. The English girls who had pleaded for him were his staunch friends, indeed he was friends with all the family, and he and the two white boys, Willie and Fred, had great times bathing in the river together. The white boys taught Usetemba to swim, or rather drove him into learning that useful art by the simple fashion of swimming after him and ducking him until he decided that it would be just as well to be as much at home in the water as they were. So he went through the exciting experience that we all know when we learn to swim, entering a little way into the water, and then a little further, finding himself a long way from the bank and thinking, "Now I shall be drowned and die," and then finding himself across and singing a triumphant song on the opposite bank. And he knew the joy of conquest on the day when he crossed the river in flood and said to himself,

"After all the water is nothing, it only wants courage to be a victor."

And while the white boys were teaching Usetemba to conquer the water, their sisters were doing something towards his education in a greater matter still.

There was service every Sunday in the Mission Church close by, and the two girls always tried to get their house-boy to go and hear what the Mission priest had to tell about the God Who loved black men and white. Ellen, the older girl, was specially eager about it, and took care that Usetemba, who was something of a dandy by this time, as young Kafirs of his age are apt to be, should always have a nice shirt to go in. A little bit of bribery, some people might say, but those shirts of Ellen's carried a message with them, and set Usetemba thinking again. She must be very keen, he thought, on his going to church, if she were ready to take all that trouble; yet, so far as he could see, it was not going to bring any special advantage to herself. He did not like to meet her sad look when he had to answer that he had missed church: she must

care very much about the missionary's message if she wanted him so much to hear it; and so he began to listen as he had never listened before. As he put it himself, there were two hearts in him just then, one of them pulling him back to the old heathen ways of his own people, and the other drawing him to the wonderful new Faith of the white man. When he went back to the kraal the one heart told him, loud and strong, that here was his place among his own folk. And the other heart talked to him when he lay on his face on the hill-side, with an

The Mission Church.

eye on the cattle, and studied a new treasure that he was beginning to value, the Gospel of S. Matthew. There were such wonderful stories there, stories that made him ready to laugh for very joy.

And that new heart spoke to him, too, when the hymns were sung in church, and pricked him with the strange sweet sadness that music brings, stirring all sorts of hopes and longings and recollections that hurt us and help us all at once. He

took a big step forward when Mr. Barker, one of the missionaries at Pietermaritzburg, who had been teaching him to read, moved to Ladysmith, and asked Usetemba to go with him. The Kafir boy was keen to go on with his lessons, and that new heart of his urged him not to lose the opportunity, so he agreed to go. Somehow, on the road, he and the Englishman missed each other, and he had a long, solitary journey with only his little dog, Uflolo for company. Once, in the dark hour before the dawn, he fancied he saw a lion in front of him, and, kneeling down, he prayed to the white man's God.

When he rose up, a new courage, such as he had never known before, had come into his heart: he was not afraid even if he were going to die. But, instead of a lion in the way, he found the wagon of a white man, who cheered him on his journey, and he went forward again boldly, reading now and again a few words from his book to give him something to think about.

So he joined Mr. Barker at Ladysmith, where he worked away at his schooling, and saw a wonder, of which he had heard tell in his old home, but had never beheld before, nothing more or less than a fall of snow. But his stay there ended sadly, for a malicious Dutchman poisoned his dear dog. Usetemba had done with Ladysmith after that. Uflolo had been his friend and comrade; he could not stay in the place with the man who had killed him out of spite, and Mr. Barker gave him leave to go.

When he got back to Pietermaritzburg his mind was made up, and he was looking forward eagerly to the day of his baptism. But on his arrival he heard that his father was very ill, so he went back to the kraal to see him. It was rather a sad visit. Usetemba tried to tell the dying man some of the wonderful truths that had come to mean so much to him. But he could get no hearing: the old man only reproached him bitterly for leaving the religion of his kindred. His mother, however, liked to hear him talk. She had had plenty of ups and downs, of suffering and sorrow in her life, and the news of the love and care of the God Whom her son had learnt to serve, came with comfort to her tired heart.

Usetemba stayed a little while in the village after his father died. Then he found that his elder brother, now the head of the family, would, if he could, throw obstacles in the way of

his baptism. So he simply said that he was going back to Pietermaritzburg, and returned once more to the good Georges. And in due time the English priest, Dr. Callaway, received him into the congregation of Christ's Church. He knew now whither all those strange thoughts had been leading him, since he had first begun, as a little lad herding the goats, to wonder about the making of the world. He knew Who had been speaking to that new heart which drew him towards the white man's faith, and he said to himself in his simple way, "It is well that I should believe in the Lord and become His child."

His Christian life was not all plain sailing for him, any more than it is for the rest of us. He had plenty of temptations to meet, temptations to bad thoughts and to little acts of dishonesty, cropping up again and again to harass the new Christian. But Usetemba knew now where to go for strength.

When we heard of him last he had followed his friend and teacher, Dr. Callaway, into new country, where the missionary was forming a Christian Settlement. And it was this friend who took down Usetemba's story and turned it into English, so that those at home might read of how a Kafir boy was led along, step by step, to feel after and to find the Father of black men and white.

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